

Radical Forgiveness in a World at War

A sermon on Exodus 14:19-31; Romans 14:1-12 & Matthew 18:21-35 by Nathan Nettleton, 17 September 2023

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Message

God's offer of unlimited forgiveness creates a new world in which we are free to stop judging one another and turning on one another and spiralling into violence and hatred.

Sermon

During our recent overseas trip Margie and I spent nearly three weeks in Ireland, including a few days in Northern Ireland. Nearly every museum or historical site you visit in Ireland contains reminders of the history of violent struggle in this beautiful land. First it was a struggle against the English colonisers and their violent and oppressive rule. Then as concessions were made by the English to try to bring peace, there was a splintering among the Irish population themselves, essentially between those who wanted to continue to struggle for a united Irish republic, and those who wanted to acquiesce to English rule and allow a few counties in the north to continue separately from the republic as part of the United Kingdom. Most recently there was the big flare-up of that conflict known euphemistically in Ireland as "the Troubles," when terror reigned for the final three decades of the 1900s.

Driving into Northern Ireland, I found my awareness of "the troubles" suddenly raked up. There was visible evidence everywhere, particularly in the displays of flags, of public murals, and of graffiti, and some of it was so recent that I felt like the resentments of that era were continuing to simmer just beneath the surface. For some people they are. During the Troubles, both sides were guilty of horrific atrocities, and it would be impossible to mount a convincing case that one side was more or less guilty than the other, whatever your opinion on the original causes.

Because the pro-English northern counties were predominantly Protestant, and the rest of the island is predominantly Catholic, the wars in Ireland were often portrayed, including by some of the participants, as religious wars. That was never really true, but it was often seen and sometimes experienced as such. This inevitably had a terrible impact on the public image of the Christian faith, because it reinforced the stereotype that most war and violence is caused by religion.

This week, we passed the 22nd anniversary of the 9/11 Islamist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, which then triggered retaliatory wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Like the numerous terrorist bombings of the Troubles in Ireland, the 9/11 attacks were a monstrous and barbaric act. They were an attack on a civilian population and caused enormous loss of life and a searing scar of grief in the national psyche. And also like the Troubles, some of the perpetrators claimed they were unleashing this violence in the name of God, a claim which is ultimately a hideous blasphemy against the character of God.

Unfortunately, many of the things that have been done in response to those attacks have been an equally hideous blasphemies. Many many times more civilians have been killed in the vengeful response than were killed in the attacks themselves. And increasingly it appears that our response has aided the accomplishment of the terrorist's aims of spreading fear and distrust among the people.

The whole thing is a large scale illustration of the kind of world we live in, a world of sacred debt and exchange where every attack must be repaid and is usually repaid with interest leading to further escalations. A world in which, if there is any concept of forgiveness at all, sees it as a strictly limited commodity which may be extended in a few circumstances, but which, when the limits are breached, is quickly replaced by the business-as-usual of exacting full repayment for every debt.

If you wonder how this could be so in countries like Ireland and the USA which have long proclaimed their allegiance to Jesus, then you probably need look no further than the questions asked of Jesus by his disciple Peter in the gospel story we heard tonight. “If another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

There are some very revealing assumptions that underpin Peter’s question. Firstly he assumes that there is and must be a limit on forgiveness. If I forgive someone, and they keep turning around and doing the same thing again, there must be a point at which the possibility of forgiveness is exhausted and we return to the business-as-normal of repayments and repercussions.

Secondly, Peter assumes that in offering forgiveness seven times, he would really be being staggeringly generous beyond all expectations. Until Jesus blows his suggestion out of the water, he really thinks that he is reflecting the radical forgiveness of Jesus, and he assumes because of the previous assumption that there must be a limit.

And thirdly, underpinning the assumption that we would only have to forgive so far, lies another, that God’s forgiveness is similarly limited. God might be forgiving, but God’s forgiveness too is only a suspension of business-as-usual, and at some point our opportunity to be forgiven crosses the line and God returns to being an angry vengeful God who deals out punishments in strict accordance with what we deserve.

There are two parts to Jesus’s answer. First he says, “Not seven times, I tell you, but seventy-seven times.” Or seventy times seven times. There is an ambiguity in the way the number is expressed in the original language, but it doesn’t matter because the point is not a bigger number but that forgiveness should be unlimited, far beyond what you could keep count of. If you are still counting, you are not really forgiving. You are just biding your time before snapping back to the business-as-usual of repercussions and making offenders pay.

Then, as he so often does, Jesus illustrates his point with a story, the parable we heard earlier. A man is astonishingly forgiven an impossibly huge debt, but then when he fails to similarly forgive someone who owes him a comparatively trivial amount, his own debt is restored and he is thrown into jail to be tortured.

It is a powerful story. Jesus uses it to set up a vision of two different worlds: the world of unlimited forgiveness, and the world of business-as-usual where everyone is made to pay. The business as usual world is depicted as a hell of impossible debts and fear and torture. But does it mean that God inflicts torture on those who don’t forgive, as it seems to suggest? Is this showing that God resorts to repercussions and punishments after all?

The Exodus story we heard earlier would suggest yes. It is the sort of story that paints God as a warrior, and God’s great deeds as deeds of bloodshed. God takes sides and after an

escalating series of violent warnings, now massacres the enemy. Such a God clearly puts limits on forgiveness, and this is what happens when the limits are crossed. And yet even within that story, there are hints of an alternative testimony. God is said to have kept the armies apart at night, and God confuses the Egyptians and sets them to flight before there is any need to kill them. Was their death really God's doing? Or was the escape God's doing, while the slaughter of their army is the sort of violent reprisal that the victors always attribute to their gods?

We can only answer the question by reading the Bible as those who read everything through the lens of Jesus Christ as the definitive revelation of God's nature and who thus interpret all of scripture in the ways that Jesus has taught us to interpret it.

Jesus's story does not tell us that God withdraws forgiveness and inflicts the punishment. It speaks only of God "handing us over" to the outcomes we have chosen for ourselves. It is a phrase that alludes to the passion of Jesus himself, for the same words are used to speak of Jesus being handed over to suffering and death. God's forgiveness creates a world of unlimited forgiveness, but we choose whether or not we will live in that world. The torture and hell are the world we create for ourselves, the business-as-usual world of repercussions and making everyone pay.

The fiery pictures of the World Trade Centre towers and the bombed out villages in Afghanistan and the angry accusatory murals and monuments in Northern Ireland are dramatic images of the world we create for ourselves when we demand that there be full payment for every offence, or at least every offence beyond our chosen limit on forgiveness. You can't choose the rules of one world to apply to yourself and the rules of the other to apply to others. Even psychologically you can't do it. The way you treat others will determine the way you expect to be treated, and you will live in constant fear and self-condemnation as you await the inevitable closure of the circle around your neck.

But what Jesus reveals to us in his own radical acts of unlimited forgiveness is that God has created another world and called us to live in it and leave the business-as-usual world behind us. There is a new world where love conquers all and forgiveness knows no limits; a world where mercy is not measured or counted, because there is no violent reprisal that is just being temporarily held back. This is the world to which Jesus bears witness and into which he calls us to live.

We can easily draw all our illustrations of these contrasting worlds from the world of international politics, and war and reconciliation between nations. But most of us are not directly involved in making those sorts of decisions. We live these things out on much smaller stages, but every little stage contributes to building one or the other world.

The reading we heard from Paul's letter to the Romans gives us some closer to home examples of what it all means for us. He challenges our tendency to pass judgement on one another, and points out that there will be plenty of differences of opinion on how best to honour God. It is not our task to seek to enforce "the right" way. We are responsible for the integrity of our own behaviour and not that of others.

One person will think that in order to faithfully honour God's call to care for the earth, you should only eat organic free-range meats, while another will think you shouldn't eat meat at

all, and another will think you can eat at McDonalds everyday and it makes no difference to your discipleship.

One person will think short skirts and a bit of cleavage in public are a valid expression of God's declaration that the body is good, while another person will insist on public modesty and wearing a hijab.

One person will think that the only faithful path for a gay Christian is celibacy, while another will advocate for the Christian blessing of same-sex marriage.

It is not our task to discern and seek to enforce "the right" way on others. We are responsible for the integrity of our own behaviour and not that of others. When someone sees the issues differently to you and the behaviours under question pose no a threat to others, then leave it to God and the person to sort out. Give them the benefit of the doubt. Seventy times seven and beyond.

We Baptists have always championed the belief that God will deal with different people differently, and tailor his demands to the individual concerned, and therefore we must respect their freedom of conscience and cut one another plenty of slack. When we have been set free by our experience of the unlimited forgiveness of God made known in Christ, we are free to not demand others measure up to our beliefs or do things in our way.

How many times should I allow another to do things the wrong way? As many as seven times?" "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven times. Until you lose count and on beyond."

The Apostle's descriptions are just little examples of what it means to live in the new world of forgiveness. God has created this world and unlimited forgiveness is ours if we are ready and willing to step into that world and live its life of unlimited mercy and love.

But of course, the old world remains constantly in our face, doesn't it? The practice of forgiveness takes constant commitment and effort because it is not normal, it is not our default response. It requires us to push against the stream of our own impulses and of the normal flow of our society. And when we do push against the flow, there are hostile consequences. Jesus brought down the wrath of the world on his own head and was tortured to death on a cross when he announced that the old world of judgement and punishment was not endorsed by God.

And so we find ourselves still in fear: in fear that our constant failure to live in this new world will result in the scenario described at the end of the parable where we are deemed to have made our choices and are handed over to the consequences of our falling back again and again into the old ways of judgement and hostility and demanding that others be made to pay.

But still there is good news. Even more good news, bigger and better again. For although the cross shows the extent of our rejection of the new world of forgiveness, and our willingness to make even an innocent victim pay the price of our anger and offended pride, the resurrection of Jesus shows the limitlessness of God's forgiveness. Even when we fall back into the business-as-usual of the old world and create our own hell of fear and torture and terrorism

and death, even then, the ultimate victim of our betrayals, Jesus, will continue to rise from every hell into which we cast him, to break the grip of death and to show again and again that there is no limit to the forgiveness that just keeps coming back, seventy times seventy times 9/11 times infinity.